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ABSTRACT

A Delphi Technique was used to examine the problems of early childhood special education programs in rural Florida. Two rounds of questionnaires were completed by a panel of early childhood special education administrators and teachers from 14 of Florida's 27 rural counties. In response to the questionnaires, the panel developed 51 problem-related statements and 39 suggestions for improvements in service delivery. Compared to administrators, teachers were more concerned with issues raised by the 51 problem-related statements, and more positive about most suggested program modifications. Teachers and administrators diverged significantly on 33 percent of suggested modifications. The problem statements fell into six categories: educational staff problems, educational programming concerns, funding issues, rural ecology issues, family concerns, and issues with other service providers. The rural ecology category had the most problem statements, many encompassing problems related to long distances between home and school and the prevalence of rural poverty. The individual problems identified as most important (over 70 percent agreement) were lack of parental child care skills, lack of stable home environments, lack of specialized care providers, lack of funds for teachers and facilities, lack of parent involvement, long bus rides for students, and lack of preschool experiences due to rural isolation. The most strongly supported modifications were establishing home-school liaisons, increasing family counseling services, providing funding mechanisms sufficient to attract more rural service providers, and lowering child-teacher ratios. (SV)

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ISSUES AND NEEDS IN RURAL EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES IN FLORIDA: A DELPHI STUDY

Introduction

Almost a decade after PL 99-457 legislation, schools are still faced with many challenges in serving young children with disabilities. One area of challenge includes early childhood special education services in rural settings. Yet, much of the research on early childhood education services has been in an urban setting and may be of limited usefulness to rural policy makers. Mulkey (1993) observed that perceived differences exist between education in rural and urban settings. There is limited hard evidence on how rural schools differed from their urban counterparts. Further, there is limited information on how rural characteristics influence early childhood educational programs for young children with disabilities.

The Delphi Technique

The purpose of this study was to learn about the key educational issues faced by rural early childhood special educators and administrators in rural school districts in Florida. A Delphi Technique (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975) was used to develop a understandingt on the important problems facing these rural educators and the changes which may be beneficial in serving young children with disabilities and their families. The Delphi Technique is an idea generating technique useful in situations where individual judgments are being tapped and combined to arrive at a satisfactory level of consensus (Delbecq et al., 1975). It uses a series of two or three rounds of questionnaires to be responded to by an expert panel in order to generate responses and develop a consensus on a topic.

Research Methodology

Design

The Delphi Technique used in this research design incorporated the use two rounds of questionnaires to generate responses and develop agreement from a panel of rural service providers regarding the problems of early childhood special education programs in randomly selected rural school districts in Florida.

The definition of rural used in this Delphi exercise was based on MSA as refined by the ten-class ERS/USDA taxonomy (Stephens, 1992). Specifically, rural counties were those (a) not part of a MSA as per the 1990 census report of the U.S. Bureau of Census; (b) did not have a large urbanized population, i.e., residents of an incorporated area, greater than 20,000; and (c) were not adjacent to

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the primary county comprising the MSA. Twenty-seven counties of the 67 counties in Florida met this definition.

The Delphi panel was composed of one early childhood special education program administrator and one early childhood special education certified instructor from each of the selected school districts. In order to qualify, a panelist must have had at least three years of full time experience in the county school system and at least five years of full time experience with early childhood and special education programs, preferable in rural areas. Only individuals who showed very interest in the project and had good qualifications were selected. The final panel was composed of fourteen program administrators and thirteen teachers. It was not possible to find a qualified teacher in one county.

Procedures

The panelists received two rounds of questionnaires. The purpose of the first round of questions was to generate overall ideas and problems and the second, using a 4 point Likert-type scale (very important, important, slight importance, no importance), was to develop a consensus of the importance of each statement in the questionnaire. Twenty-five out of the final twenty-six panelists responded to both rounds. Round One questionnaire posed two questions:

- What are the problems facing rural educational service providers that hinder your ability to serve the needs of children pre-K to age 5 with disabilities?
- What modifications in current services would help improve the delivery of services to these children?

Results and Discussion

Statements reported in Round One fell into six categories: educational staff problems, educational programming concerns, funding issues, rural ecology issues, family concerns, and issues with other service providers. Fifty-one problem-related statements and 39 modifications were developed. These are discussed in detail below. Table 2 lists the most important problems and modifications suggested by the panel.

Differences between Panel Groups

The responses of the teachers on the panel showed that they were more concerned than were administrators with the issues raised by the 51 problem-related statements. This is evident in Figure 1, which provides a comparison of position on problems of the two groups. In each instance, teachers felt the issue to be of greater concern than did the administrators on the panel. Teachers also responded more positively than the administrators on all but one of the modifications suggested by the panel (see Figure 2). This one was the suggestion to develop ways to increase the availability of service providers. Overall, the beliefs of the teachers and

Table 2
Most Important Problems and Modifications Identified by the DELPHI Panel (from High to Low)

Problems and Issues

%	X	Statement
88	3.38	Lack of parental child care skills. (family)
83	3.29	Lack of stable home family environments. (family)
79	3.25	Lack of specialized service providers, i.e. PT, OT, medical, speech, etc. (other services)
79	3.17	Lack of sufficient funds to hire more teachers. (funding)
75	3.13	Lack of sufficient funds for facilities. (funding)
72	3.16	Lack of parental involvement in children's education. (family)
72	3.08	Long distances in rural areas require lengthy bus rides for students. (rural)
72	2.88	Children lack sufficient preschool experiences because of rural isolation. (rural)
68	3.04	The lack of qualified teachers to meet the needs of students. (staff)
68	3.00	Lack of sufficient funds to hire teacher aides. (funding)
68	2.96	A staff not trained to meet the broad range of disabilities in the same classroom.(staff)

Solutions and Modifications

96	3.60	Establish a parent liaison or case manager to assist parents in coordinating and providing for services for their child with schools and other agencies. (family)
96	3.56	Increase counseling services for families and children. (family)
96	3.52	Provide funding mechanisms sufficient to bring service providers into rural areas. (funding)
96	3.52	Lower exceptional student education (ESE) child-teacher ratios in rural counties. (staff)
92	3.58	Develop ways to obtain more PT, OT, speech, and other service providers. (other providers)
92	3.54	Develop effective family and parenting education programs for parents. (family)
92	3.48	Increase the general funding for pre-K special education programs. (funding)
92	3.44	Provide more training and staff development opportunities to update skills and knowledge.(staff)
92	3.44	Develop a teacher aides training and certification program at a community

college. (staff)

92 3.42 Provide incentives to perspective teachers to teach ESE programs. (staff)

92 3.36 Re-evaluate the funding formula for support services and outreach programs. (funding)

92 3.32 Establish a program to allow home visits by teachers to work on specific child needs and develop rapport with families. (family)

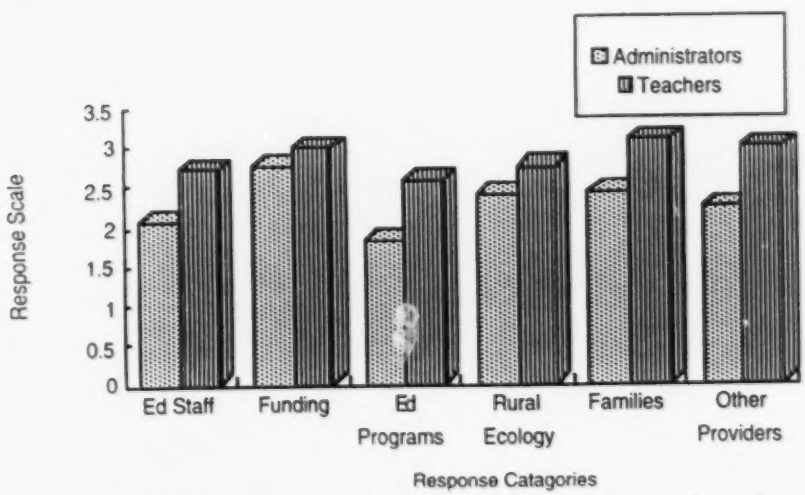
a - the percantage of the panel answering who felt the issue was very important or important.

administrators were significantly divergent on 33% of the 39 modification-related statements.

Education staff

The panel delineated 10 specific problems related to educational staff. The panel's concerns ranged from overt controls and a lack of supports provided by the county administration to concerns over the classroom competencies of teachers and teacher aides. The panel felt that professional staff was sometimes not adequately prepared to meet the educational, physical, and cultural needs of their rural students. Further, the knowledge and skills of classroom aides in working with very young children was a particular concern of teachers on the panel. Significantly, administrators did not recognize this as important.

Figure 1
Response Differences between Administrators and Teachers on Question of Problems facing Rural Early Childhood Special Education Programs



Nine modifications related to educational staffing were suggested. The most valued modification was to lower ESE child-

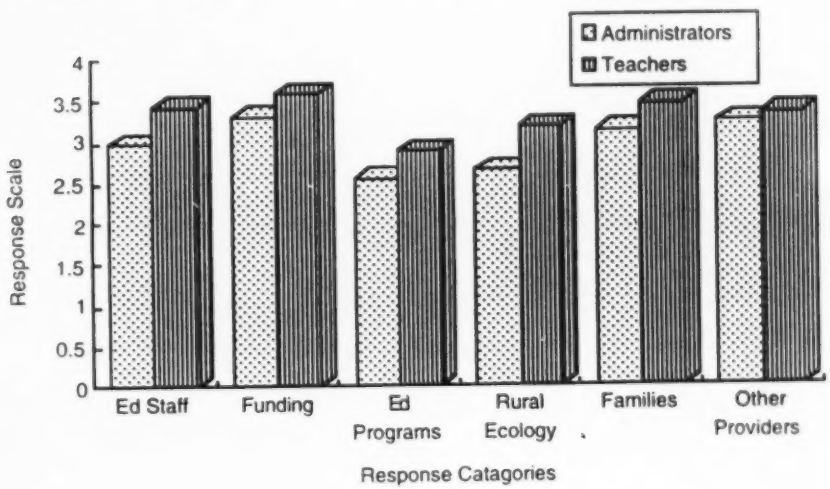
teacher ratios. Other suggestions provided for improving staff competencies were to the increase opportunities for inservice training and preplanning time, develop more formal training and certification programs for teacher aides, and reduce teacher-stucent ratios.

Educational Programs

The panel suggested 10 problems. The panel did not recognize that the problems and potential solutions enumerated were as important an issue as those in the other topical areas. This was particularly true with administrators. Their major concern was the ability to properly identify and evaluate at an early age those young children who may be in need of educational and medical supports. Being able to include children with disabilities in more normal settings in the regular classroom was also seen as a problem.

Twelve educational programming modifications were suggested. Increasing mainstreaming opportunities for young children with disabilities was seen to be the most important. Other suggestions to remediate problems related to educational programs were to improve or expand screening in day centers and to institute broader, more intensive transition programs. Both administrators and teachers recognized the need to further their efforts to develop a philosophy of inclusive placements.

Figure 2
Response Differences between Administrators and Teachers on Question of Modifications of Rural Early Childhood Special Education Programs



Funding Issues

Problems associated with funding accounted for seven of the total of 51 suggested. Funding issues were seen as influencing the quality of educational services, but there was wide disagreement as to their impact. The panel saw the lack of sufficient funds to hire more teachers and teacher aides as the most serious results.

Five funding modifications were suggested by the panel. The importance to each was greater than modifications in the other topical areas. The modification perceived to be the most important was developing funding mechanisms to secure needed service providers into rural areas. The panel felt that solutions to the funding issue, outside of increased moneys, were in restructuring the funding formulas used for outreach programs and support services and to provide greater flexibility within the funding mechanism.

Rural Ecology

Problems related to rural ecology accounted for 11 of the 51 issues stated by the panel, the most for any of the six categories. The panel saw problems in long distances from home to school, resulting in lengthy bus rides, and transportation and communication difficulties for families and service providers. The ravages of poverty were recognized by nearly all on the panel. Young teachers had a hard time adjusting to rural life which often resulted in continuing staff turnover. The need to provide for diverse but low incidence exceptionalities strained the already limited pool of available educational resources. Physical, occupational, and speech therapists were difficult to find and keep.

Solutions were few. The only one suggested was to increase the number of bus routes in order to reduce the length of children's bus rides. The panel also hoped for an increased funding base and a greater flexibility in state and federal funding mechanisms. Increased placement in a least restrictive environment was seen as a viable solution for improving the quality of a child's educational and social experiences at a lesser per student cost.

Family Concerns

The panel listed nine family-related concerns. The greatest concern was the lack of parental child care skills and knowledge. Teachers, again, had greater concerns in regard to family issues than did administrators.

Six solutions were suggested. Establishing a parent liaison program was believed to be the most valued solution. Teachers also recognized the need to increase home visit programs.

Other Service Providers

Problems related to the services of other professional care providers accounted for four of the 51 problems. The panel recognized their county's continuous efforts to find and keep specialized services providers. Here again, the panel voiced a problem which is more often than not felt by most rural school districts around the country (Magrab, 1992). Other concerns were with interagency cooperation, the lack of between professionals, and the large number of forms using different terminology used by the various agencies.

Six solutions were suggested with one significant disagreement. The most recognized solution listed, developing creative ways to attract physical therapists, occupational therapists, and other professionals, was seen different by administrators and teachers. This was the only statement wherein administrators perceived it to be more important than did teachers. Other suggestions receiving the most support were in developing a uniform paperwork system and using a transdisciplinary team approach to assess and design appropriate child services.

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